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ABSTRACT

Part of a series on early childhood demonstration programs designed to improve early parent-child relationships, stimulate positive child development, and prevent later behavior difficulties, the pamphlet describes a Toy Library project for low-income families in Washington, D.C., which, in addition to loaning books and toys, offers a wide range of child development services and activities. Toys loaned are designed for three separate age groups: infants, toddlers, and 3 to 5 year olds. Among the activities offered are such things as afternoon workshops for parents and their children, first aid courses, cooking demonstrations, and films and discussions on early child stimulation and family health. Other program aspects discussed include staffing (a head librarian, a library assistant, a library aide, and two volunteers) and supplies and facilities. A study of the program's impact indicated appreciable changes in the participating children's behavior, such as better speech, more interest in reading, and greater curiosity. (DLS)

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Parent-Child Program Series

National Institute of Mental Health

Report No. 2

Cultural Enrichment by Means of a Toy Library

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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2

Parent-Child Program Series

Report No. 2
Cultural Enrichment by Means of a Toy Library

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Preface

Families and Professionals as Partners pamphlets represent an effort on the part of the Center for Studies of Child and Family Mental Health, National Institute of Mental Health, to make visible successful models of programs which enable families to play an important role in improving child mental health. Each pamphlet describes a practical program that can be adapted to local community needs. The present Parent-Child Program Series of five pamphlets describes demonstration programs involving young children from infancy through preschool. The general goals of the series include improving early parent-child relationships, stimulating positive social-emotional development, and preventing later behavior difficulties. This reflects the center's goal of encouraging the utilization of recent research findings by service providers and families to help improve child mental health in their communities.

Joy G. Schulterbrandt
Chief
Center for Studies of Child and Family
Mental Health

PARENT-CHILD PROGRAM SERIES

Introduction

Our Nation's children are a precious but often underdeveloped natural resource. Since the 1960's, social conscience and new scientific insights have converged to spark exploration and demonstration of many new ways to enhance the early years of childhood. Spurred by child development research that marked the preschool years as the cornerstone for subsequent cognitive and emotional development, a number of action and evaluation programs have begun with Federal funding to discover effective ways to stimulate psychological growth in infants and young children. Although many of these programs have been geared toward children from poverty backgrounds, they can help in better development for all children. Head Start, Follow Through, and Sesame Street are among the most famous of these large-scale programs.

Less familiar, perhaps, has been another line of exploration; although more modest in scope, it is comparable in developmental impact: educating parents to work and play with their young children so that their youngsters may grow as thinking, feeling individuals. Many of the programs have been sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health, which has long recognized that starting children at a very early age on the right developmental footing may prevent later emotional and intellectual problems.

More than a decade of experiment and study has yielded a wealth of parent-involved programs for early childhood enrichment. Their efficacy is well documented. They work—and they can work in new settings and communities as well. The question now is: Will we let them work? Are there people who care enough about children in their own communities to carry these programs forward? We have made great strides as a Nation in providing better opportunities for children to grow up physically healthy. But, for all too many preschoolers, critical formative years are passing without the stimulation and guidance required for healthy emotional and mental development. As innumerable experimental programs have shown, parents can become eager and able teachers of their infants and children once they have learned how to translate their caring into skills and attitudes that actually help their children to develop. Many parents tend to underestimate their young children's abilities because they do not know how to bring them out into the open.

Good parenting does not come automatically with the birth of a child—or even many children. It is a skillful activity that for many takes some training. How to provide that training—in a number of different settings and for somewhat different children—is the subject of this series of pamphlets.

The approaches to parent training reported here grew out of research-demonstration programs supported by the National Institute of Mental Health. Having demonstrated their feasibility and worth, these approaches are now ready for use wherever there are communities willing to make a modest investment that may pay big, long-range dividends for their children. The specific training programs are for the most part relatively simple and inexpensive to implement, and they are likely to offer rich rewards not only to the children but to their parents as well. Because the skills parents acquire are easy to transmit, these programs potentially have a snowball effect: Each parent trained may transmit skills to other children and parents. Once a program has been established, recruitment is often unnecessary. Enthusiastic parents spread the word to others. Over and over these programs have met with great parent support because they provide them with the deeply gratifying ability to help their children make visible progress at home and later at school—often far more than parents thought possible.

This report provides an overview of one approach to parent training, but only its highlights. More detailed information is available. We will describe the program as it was carried out in its original setting as a research-demonstration project, but, as you will see, many variations on the theme are possible, depending on local community needs and resources.

Parent training programs are no panaceas. But they represent needed ways to start young children on the right developmental path—stimulating their curiosity, rewarding their explorations and little triumphs, guiding mind, hand, and eye, indeed the whole child, toward greater understanding, confidence, and competence. Both parents and their young children can learn a form of communication that enriches and delights.

Cultural Enrichment by Means of a Toy Library

Most libraries ignite the mind in silence, but not this one. It is noisy and bustling with adults and young children talking, playing, and sometimes singing—hardly a place for scholarly contemplation, but nonetheless a place for learning. This library, for children and their parents, does have books, but its main resource is good toys to use and borrow—a wide variety of the kinds that help preschoolers expand their mental and physical abilities, especially when adults guide their play.

Toy libraries, which have been with us for some years in scattered sites around the country, are still relatively rare, although growing in popularity as a simple and inexpensive way to enrich community play resources for children. But toy libraries can be even more than that, as many families discovered in Washington, D.C., where a quite special one was established in the heart of the inner city. There, with NIMH support, a fading Victorian rowhouse was transformed into a handsome and vibrant toy library that also served as a neighborhood child development center. It offered not only books and toys, but a small staff of people prepared to serve as catalysts and models for good parenting and early education for preschoolers. Let us look more closely at why and how the Washington, D.C. Toy Library functioned, with an eye toward features other communities might use.

The Toy Library was founded as a research demonstration project by Dr. Dorothy Edwards, a psychologist at the American Institutes for Research. It was intended to serve several functions:

(1) To make stimulating toys available to children from low-income families

(2) To establish a place where children and parents could meet and share learning experiences together

(3) To provide an inexpensive means of reaching low-income parents and improving their child development knowledge and skill

(4) To enrich the experience of young preschoolers—both intellectually and socially—to prepare them better for school.

To achieve these goals, it offered, in addition to a toy-loan program, a lively activity program held at the library which enabled its small staff to work more intensively with neighborhood parents and their children. While not every parent who came was transformed into an

ideal child-development guide, many became more sensitized to their own crucial roles as their children's first teachers. They had ready access to toys, techniques, and support that could help them do a better job of parenting.

The Toy Loan Program

One basic function of the Toy Library, naturally, was to operate a free toy-loan program. With the advice of major toy manufacturers, Dr. Edwards obtained a supply of toys appropriate for the broad age range of children expected to use the library. They were designated for three age groups: infants, toddlers, and 3 to 5-year-olds. The toys were displayed in three separate sections of the library.

Procedurally, the Toy Library was organized much like any public book library. Every borrower filled out a registration form and could initially borrow one toy and one book a week from the library's open shelves. After a person had visited the library twice and returned the materials loaned, he or she was considered a "regular" member, could borrow a greater number of toys and books, and had access to the more expensive toys. Library users were requested to return toys in good condition within a week, but they could renew them; and some infant toys, such as crib mobiles, were loaned for longer periods. Each time materials were borrowed or returned, a record was kept. When toys were returned they were inspected by the library staff, repaired if necessary, washed, and returned to the shelves for reuse. All members were invited to social get-togethers with the library staff to discuss early childhood development and education. Both children and parents were encouraged to participate in special play sessions and programs such as movies, story readings, puppet shows, and music.

The Activities Program

Families using the library could, if they wished, simply borrow toys and have minimal contact with the library staff. However, the library staff were prepared to offer more to low-income parents and children who were receptive. Regular borrowers were often engaged by staff in casual conversations about children and toys and ways to work with them to stimulate the children's development. Staff members also subtly guided parents in the selection of appropriate toys for their children, often encouraging them to use those requiring verbal interaction between parent and child. Printed material was available with some toys suggesting ways to use them

to best developmental advantage. For example, it might highlight possible ways to use a stacking toy and the features parents could talk about with their child while playing together.

In addition to these casual types of guidance, the Toy Library offered more structured—but still informal—opportunities for interested mothers (and occasionally fathers) to enhance their parenting skills. Parents were invited to attend "Tuesday afternoon workshops," which were initially designed as play sessions for the children, with parent meetings in another room. These naturally evolved into group sessions with both parents and children sharing in the fun and learning. Workshops explored many realms of child development in a casual, sociable atmosphere. Jean McNelis, Associate Project Director, has described their flair and flavor:

> [Some] sessions have dealt with parts of the body and the senses. Since no effort is made to have homogeneous age groups for children, these sessions have included infants and 5-year-olds. The content was often too difficult for the very young, but most would imitate the older children and the mothers as they pointed to hands, feet, etc. to musical accompaniment by the librarian on the autoharp. Probably the most successful workshop to date dealt with taste, where the four basic tastes were described and sampled, followed by blindfolded identification of food tidbits (various fruits, crackers, etc.). The mothers were fascinated by the experiment and, although many of the children would not verbalize, the mothers were encouraged to continue experimenting at home. Feedback indicated that some of them did. Experiments identifying familiar sounds were also popular, and brought us to realize that many commonplace experiences have never been thought about by this group of mothers.
>
> We have assisted the mothers in taking Polaroid pictures of their children, an activity which has delighted them. Because of the interest of the mothers in this type of combined mother-child activity, it will be continued, with the goal of making the mother more aware of basic concepts so that she can, in turn, teach the child. Normal attendance at workshops has ranged from 5 to 12, usually with a nucleus of 3-4 regular attendees and some whose attendance is sporadic.

Adding to the library's ambiance of fun and sociability, snacks and refreshments were served at these workshops and other programs for members.

The library's activity program was organized and operated flexibly, with ample room to initiate activities in response to

members' needs and demands. Among its other offerings were weekly free Red Cross First Aid courses for parents; cooking demonstrations using samples of surplus food typically available in the area; regular films and discussions on early child stimulation and family health; group birthday parties for all children born in a given month; annual Christmas parties featuring Santa and his elf; children's movies and puppet shows; group field trips to parks and zoos; parent-child art sessions to prepare holiday home decorations; an art room with free access to art supplies for mothers and children; a mothers' sewing room with a housekeeping corner for playing children; a TV corner where parents and children could watch educational TV together; and a used clothing exchange. In short, the library offered a rich array of activities that made it an attractive family meeting place, not merely a warehouse for toys.

Staffing

The Toy Library carried out its many functions with a tiny staff of one professional, two paraprofessionals, and two volunteers who operated the library from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekdays and occasionally on Saturdays. Although for other communities more or less staffing may be necessary and/or desirable, depending on the program's size, the following are recommended for a comparable program:

1 Head Librarian—	a professional with training in preschool education and early childhood development
1 Library Assistant—	warm, child-oriented paraprofessionals who can be trained on the job.
1 Library Aid—	

A volunteer staff can expand the capabilities of paid staff immeasurably. In the Washington, D.C. program, two volunteer workers from the community were used, one a middle-class college educated housewife, the other a welfare mother.

Dr. Edwards notes the desirability of having at least one male on the staff to serve as a role model for the children, many of whom are fatherless. However, she found that having a male staff member was not without problems. Three different men were hired for the position but did not stay long. All were excellent with the children and parents but felt "funny" about making a living by playing with young children. They reported that some mothers tried to monopolize their time.

The staff members performed many common functions:

Keeping toys well organized for borrowing

Keeping accurate and up-to-date records

Recruiting and orienting new members to the library
Encouraging parents to interact positively with children and showing them by example
Recommending appropriate toys to parents and explaining their use
Planning special activities for parents and children
Setting up interesting visual displays
Performing routine housekeeping chores when other help was unavailable

In addition to these functions, the Head Librarian supervised the activities of other staff and/or volunteers and amplified their knowledge and skill in early childhood development and stimulation.

Special Facilities and Supplies

Toys and Other Supplies. The Washington, D.C., Toy Library accumulated extensive experience in selecting toys appropriate for children from birth through kindergarten. Its guidelines for choosing and using them are presented in a manual which is available to the public (see page 10). In general, the staff recommends that all toys must meet the following criteria: safety (no sharp edges or toxic paint); sturdiness (solid construction, preferably thick plastic, not wood); washability; appropriate age level for intended users (see the manual for suggestions); colorful and interesting (preferably realistic); practical (reasonably inexpensively replaced, with few losable parts); useful for more than one age level; and educationally valuable (with a wide variety of clear-cut teaching goals, e.g., developing physical skills, language, social skills).

According to the library's experience, an average child borrowed about 25 times a year, or about every 2 weeks. The staff recommends, as a rule of thumb, budgeting for two toys and one book for each user, with an additional allowance for maintenance and replacement.

Other recommended supplies include low display shelves for toys, tables, rugs, a desk and office supplies, toy cleaning equipment, and refreshment resources such as a stove and refrigerator.

Physical Facilities. The Washington, D.C., Toy Library occupied a rented three-floor townhouse where many whole rooms could be designated as special activity areas. However, a similar library could be operated with far less space, as long as the following functional areas were provided: display and play space; a check-out area; a toy

maintenance area; storage space; and, ideally, space for special activities.

Program Feasibility and Impact

When the Toy Library was initiated, its feasibility was questioned. Would low-income families actually use it? Would they become regular borrowers and participate in the more structured group activities? Would toys be returned on time and intact? The answer to all these questions was a resounding "yes!"

Very active neighborhood advertisement and recruitment, including door-to-door visits, preceded the library's opening and continued even after it was open. Following a disheartening opening day, during which no one came, attendance built up gradually but steadily. The main library attracted a mixed clientele of neighborhood families, about equally divided between the low-income black families, for which it was originally intended, and middle-income white families who found that it also served their needs. The unanticipated mix of users proved to be fortuitous, since the library became a place where many types of parents and children could share experiences together.

Over a 5-year period, the Toy Library eventually serviced about 1,500 families. On the average, members made 295 visits to the library monthly, or about 3,540 a year, each time usually borrowing two toys and a book. Despite heavy use, the library sustained only a 2½ percent loss, attesting to the reliability and responsibility of the member families, most of whom regularly returned toys and books on schedule and in good condition. (A similar satellite library, later established in another low-income Washington neighborhood with a larger proportion of families on welfare, gained comparably good cooperation but a lower level of participation.)

A cluster of questions concerned the library's potential impact on parents and children. Would it reap its intended benefits, strengthening parent-child interaction and helping to prepare low-income youngsters for the school years to come? To answer these questions, many types of data on the parents and children who regularly used the Toy Library were collected, including both direct observations of behavior at the library and surveys of parents' reactions to the program and its impact on their children. Parents were asked to give two types of feedback to the program staff: a description of their children's responses to specific toys they borrowed (to aid in toy selection) and, less frequently, a checklist that canvassed parents' assessment of program impact.

Responses to the latter form gave many indications that the Toy Library was indeed accomplishing its intended effects. Many low-income parents noticed appreciable changes in their children's behavior since participating in the library program, and they frequently noted verbal changes—"his speech is better," "he wants me to read to him," and "he asks more questions." Whether or not these responses reflected true gains in the children beyond those maturation alone would bring, they appeared to attest, at the very least, to increased parental sensitivity to their children's behavior, particularly verbal behavior. (The low-income parents were more likely to report such changes than the middle-income parents, indicating a response pattern which, to Dr. Edwards, reflects the program's success in reaching its target population.)

The mothers viewed the library as having two primary functions: It was a place for them and their children to socialize with others; it was a resource for learning more about their children.

Although we do not know the program's long-term effects on school performance, it appeared to stimulate many of the preconditions known to contribute to good school adjustment.

Potential Program Adaptations and Applications

Communities interested in establishing their own toy libraries have many models to choose from. One model, like the one described here, is the independent library where both parents and children can come. It could also be established as part of an ongoing child-oriented organization or setting, such as a day care center, nursery school, or well-baby clinic; or it could be within other community facilities such as a public library, public or private housing unit, church, or community center. Yet another model is a parent-oriented toy library such as one established by the Far West Educational Development Laboratory in San Francisco. In this very low-cost model, small groups of parents of 3- and 4-year-olds met with a librarian and learned how to use eight different toys developed to teach some basic cognitive skills. The toys were loaned out during the course, then offered to the graduating parents.

A toy library can be used to enhance other community facilities as well. For example, toys from the main library could be circulated to other areas of the community, such as housing projects, preschools, and day care centers, with staff providing guidance in their use.

The toy library format can also be combined with other more structured approaches to parenting education and early childhood stimulation. Aspects of the New York Verbal Interaction Project's

program (described in Report No. 1 in this series) could be adapted, as could aspects of the parent education program developed initially for use in pediatric clinics (described in Report No. 5). These programs require more staff training than the D.C. Toy Library project found necessary, but could possibly fit in well with the baisc toy library functions.

For Further Information

Staff of the Washington, D.C., Toy Library have developed a manual, "A Practical Guide for Planning and Operating a Toy Lending Library" which is available through ERIC. A copy can be obtained by contacting the ERIC Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education, 805 W. Pennsylvania Avenue, Urbana, Ill. 61801.

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